

# Field Marshal Erwin Rommel: Genius, Hero, Martyr ... and Traitor?

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Erwin Rommel is widely regarded as one of World War II's best generals. Historian Daniel Allen Butler writes about Rommel: "In France in 1940, then for two years in North Africa, then finally back in France once again, in Normandy in 1944, he proved himself a master of armored warfare, running rings around a succession of Allied generals who never got his measure and could only resort to overwhelming numbers to bring about his defeat."[\[1\]](#)

This article will not focus on Rommel's military accomplishments, which have been thoroughly documented in numerous books and publications. Instead, this article will focus on Rommel's relationship with Adolf Hitler, whether or not Rommel was involved in the plot to assassinate Hitler, and why Rommel swallowed poison to end his life.

## Rommel's Relationship with Hitler

Hitler first learned of Rommel's military expertise when he read Rommel's book *Infantry in the Attack*. This book, published in the summer of 1937, consisted of Rommel's recollections of his service during World War I. Rommel's book went through multiple editions and sold phenomenally well, earning Rommel a surprisingly large amount of money.[\[2\]](#)

In the beginning, none of the disdain Hitler displayed to his other generals ever found its way into his relationship with Rommel. The two shared a camaraderie that did not go unnoticed by the rest of Hitler's coterie. Hitler promoted Rommel to general and then gave him command of the 7<sup>th</sup> Panzer Division in February 1940. In March 1941, Hitler personally awarded Rommel the Oakleaves to his Knight's Cross in recognition of Rommel's outstanding leadership of the 7<sup>th</sup> Panzer Division.[\[3\]](#)

Hitler next sent Rommel to North Africa to lead German forces against the British. Rommel's forces soon captured Tobruk in Libya from the British. This victory was especially important since the number of soldiers captured at Tobruk constituted the second-largest capitulation by British forces during the war. Hitler showed his esteem for Rommel by promoting him to field marshal. Rommel at the age of 49 became the youngest field marshal in the German army, and one of the youngest in German military history.[\[4\]](#)

Hitler later met with Rommel on November 5, 1943 and assigned Rommel the task of defending Germany against the Allied invasion from the west. Hitler stressed the job's importance for Germany, saying that it will be the moment of decision in the war that must turn to Germany's advantage. Rommel drew enormous energy from this meeting with Hitler. After Rommel flew back to Italy to turn over his command, he wrote about Hitler: "What power he radiates! And what faith and confidence he inspires in his people!"[\[5\]](#)

Rommel had major problems with Hitler, however, after the successful Allied landings in the west. Rommel knew Germany was in a militarily hopeless situation by late June 1944, and he wanted Hitler to negotiate peace with the Western Allies. When Rommel attempted to discuss the overall political situation at a military conference, Hitler sharply stopped him and said: "You will deal with your military

situation, and nothing else.” When Rommel attempted again to discuss the overall situation, Hitler asked Rommel to leave the room.[\[6\]](#)

Rommel signed a grimly uncompromising report on July 15, 1944, documenting Germany’s hopeless situation in the west. Rommel and the other signers said to Hitler in this report that the war could not be won militarily, and asked Hitler to draw the conclusions. Rommel told a German colonel the only thing that mattered now was that the British and Americans get to Berlin before the Russians do.[\[7\]](#)

On July 17, 1944, Rommel was severely injured when the car he was riding in crashed after being strafed by Allied airplanes. Rommel was thrown out of the car and suffered a crushing blow to the left temple and cheekbone that caused a quadruple fracture of the skull. Never again would Rommel see action on the battlefield.[\[8\]](#)

### **Negotiated Surrender Sought**

Hitler admitted to Rommel in May of 1943 that there was little chance of Germany’s winning the war, and that he had never wanted war with the West in the first place. However, since it was not possible to make peace with those in power in the West, Hitler was determined to continue the war to its bitter end. By contrast, Rommel hoped that peace with the West could be negotiated.[\[9\]](#) This was the primary source of their conflict.

Hitler was likely correct that a negotiated surrender with the Western Allies was impossible. Even leaders of the German resistance movement discovered that the Allied policy of unconditional surrender would not change with Hitler dead. On July 18, 1944, German conspirator Otto John returned from fruitless negotiations with Allied representatives in Madrid and informed his fellow plotters that unconditional surrender would be in place even if they succeeded in killing Hitler.

Dr. Eugen Gerstenmaier, a former conspirator and president of the West German Parliament after the war, stated in a 1975 interview: “What we in the German resistance during the war didn’t want to see, we learned in full measure afterward; that this war was ultimately not waged against Hitler, but against Germany.”[\[10\]](#)

A peaceful settlement of the war was impossible after the announcement of the Allied policy of unconditional surrender at a press conference in Casablanca on January 23, 1943. The Allied policy of unconditional surrender ensured that the war would be fought to its bitter end. Maurice Hankey, an experienced British statesman, summed up the effect of the unconditional surrender policy as follows:

*It embittered the war, rendered inevitable a fight to the finish, banged the door to the possibility of either side offering terms or opening up negotiations, gave the Germans and the Japanese the courage of despair, strengthened Hitler’s position as Germany’s “only hope,” aided Goebbels’s propaganda, and made inevitable the Normandy landing and the subsequent terribly exhausting and destructive advance through North France, Belgium, Luxemburg, Holland and Germany. The lengthening of the war enabled Stalin to occupy the whole of Eastern Europe, to ring down the iron curtain and so to realize at one swoop a large installment of his avowed aims against so-called capitalism, in which he includes social democracy...Not only the enemy countries, but nearly all countries were bled white by this policy, which has left us all, except the United States of America, impoverished and in dire straits. Unfortunately also, these policies, so contrary to the spirit of the Sermon on the Mount, did nothing to strengthen the moral position of the Allies.*[\[11\]](#)

Thus, Rommel's hope of ending the war in the west by an armistice while opposing Soviet advances in the East was not realistic. In fact, the Western Allies deliberately allowed the Soviet Union to take over Berlin and much of Germany. Eisenhower ordered a halt of American troops at the Elbe River, thereby presenting a gift to the Soviet Union of central Germany and much of Europe. One American staff officer bitterly commented: "No German force could have stopped us. The only thing that stood between [the] Ninth Army and Berlin was Eisenhower." [12]

### **Rommel Implicated**

Historians generally agree that Rommel was not a part of the conspiracy that attempted to assassinate Hitler on July 20, 1944. [13] However, Rommel was soon implicated in this conspiracy.

Gen. Carl-Heinrich von Stülpnagel, for whom Rommel had always had a close affection, was summoned by Gen. Wilhelm Keitel to Berlin the day after the failed assassination of Hitler. Stülpnagel, who was in on the conspiracy, attempted suicide but failed. In his ensuing delirium, Stülpnagel was heard murmuring Rommel's name. Stülpnagel was condemned to death by the People's Court and hanged on August 29, 1944. [14]

Far more-damaging to Rommel was the testimony of Lt. Col. Caesar von Hofacker. Hofacker in his interview with the Gestapo put the blame for the assassination attempt on two field marshals—Rommel and Gen. Hans von Kluge. Kluge committed suicide by swallowing a cyanide pill rather than facing trial in Germany. Hofacker eventually signed a lengthy statement alleging that Rommel had guaranteed the conspirators his active support if the assassination succeeded. Hofacker claimed that Rommel had said, "Tell your gentlemen in Berlin that when the time comes they can count on me." [15]

The Gestapo also interrogated Hitler's new chief of intelligence, Col. Georg Hansen. Hansen admitted that Claus von Stauffenberg, the assassin, and Hofacker had stated to their fellow plotters on July 16, 1944, that Kluge and Rommel believed the western front would collapse within two weeks. Hansen was later tried and executed. [16]

The testimony of Rommel's close friend and associate, Gen. Hans Speidel, was also extremely damaging to Rommel. Hitler was correctly convinced that Speidel was guilty, but Speidel's superior intellect rescued him time and time again. After the Gestapo interrogations of Speidel were complete, the army's Court of Honor was specially reconvened to hear the evidence against Speidel. Lt. Gen. Heinrich Kircheim's sworn affidavit of the hearing recorded Gestapo Chief Ernst Kaltenbrunner as stating:

*Speidel has admitted under interrogation that he was informed of the assassination plot by an emissary from Stülpnagel, but Speidel claims to have duly reported this to his immediate superior, Field Marshal Rommel, and he says it is not his fault if the field marshal did not pass his warning on. In fact—this is Speidel's case—he did not realize that Rommel kept the warning to himself. [17]*

The case against Speidel strongly incriminated Rommel in the conspiracy. When Keitel announced, "The Führer has expressed the view that there can be no doubt that Speidel is guilty," Kircheim pointed out that the burden of proof was on the prosecution. The court acquitted Speidel of the conspiracy charges. The effort to convict Rommel accelerated. [18]

Eugen Maier, the local Party boss, also visited Rommel at his home and confided to Rommel that the senior SS officer in Ulm had been overheard openly stating that Rommel no longer believed in

Germany's ultimate victory. Rommel confirmed that he did not believe a German victory was possible. Rommel said about Hitler: "That damned fool! You can't have any faith in him at all! Since I saw the Führer in November 1942 I've come to realize that his mental faculties have steadily declined." Unknown to Rommel, Maier forwarded Rommel's statement to his boss, Martin Bormann, who was Hitler's personal secretary.[\[19\]](#)

### **Rommel's Death**

Rommel was out of favor with Hitler after the successful Allied invasion in the west. Hitler said about Rommel, "He tried to find some other way out than the purely military. At one time, you know, he was also predicting imminent collapse in Italy; yet it still hasn't happened. Events proved him wrong there and justified my decision to leave Field Marshal Kesselring in charge...I regard Rommel, within certain limitations, as being an exceptionally bold and also a clever commander. But I don't regard him as a stayer, and everybody shares that view."[\[20\]](#)

Hitler's statement bespoke disappointment with Rommel, but not a belief in betrayal. Hitler's view of Rommel changed, however, when he received the aforementioned damaging reports against Rommel.[\[21\]](#)

Rommel was unaware of all the witness testimony being made against him. In fact, Rommel was hoping for a new command in the east. When Rommel's son Manfred asked him if he would accept such a command, Rommel replied: "My dear boy, our enemy in the east is so terrible that every other consideration has to give way before it. If he [Stalin] succeeds in overrunning Europe, even only temporarily, it will be the end of everything which has made life appear worth living! Of course I would go."[\[22\]](#)

Unfortunately, Rommel was never given the opportunity to command in the east. On October 14, 1944, Gen. Wilhelm Burgdorf and Gen. Ernst Maisel visited Rommel at his home. Once behind closed doors, Burgdorf came straight to the point: Rommel was accused of being complicit in the attempt on Hitler's life. Burgdorf showed Rommel copies of the interrogations of Stülpnagel, Hofacker and Speidel. A letter from Hitler gave Rommel two choices: 1) If Rommel believed himself to be innocent of the allegations against him, then Rommel must report to Hitler in person in Berlin, or 2) Rommel could take his own life by swallowing a fast-acting poison Burgdorf had brought with him for that purpose.[\[23\]](#)

Burgdorf told Rommel that Rommel's treason would never be made public if he swallowed the poison. Instead, the official story would be that Rommel died of complications from his wounds. Rommel would be given a state funeral, his wife Lucie would receive the full pension of a field marshal's widow, and no reprisals would be taken against Rommel's family or members of his household.[\[24\]](#)

After almost an hour spent with Burgdorf and Maisel, Rommel excused himself to speak to his wife. Rommel said, "In a quarter of an hour I shall be dead. I'm accused of having taken part in the attempt to kill Hitler...They say von Stülpnagel, Speidel, and von Hofacker have denounced me. It's the usual trick. I've told them that I don't believe it and that it cannot be true, but the Führer has given me the choice of taking poison or being dragged before the People's Court. They have brought the poison; they say it will take only three seconds to act."[\[25\]](#)

After rejecting Lucie's advice to fight back, Rommel repeated to Manfred what he had just told the boy's mother, and that Manfred was to maintain the strictest silence about the agreement. Rommel climbed

into the back seat of the car waiting for him. The car drove down the lane for about five minutes and then, at a signal from Burgdorf, pulled off the road and stopped. Rommel took the poison and was pronounced dead by a doctor in Ulm.[\[26\]](#)

## Conclusion

Erwin Rommel was given a state funeral as promised on October 18, 1944. Lucie collected her full pension; her entire household was not interfered with in any way by German authorities; and the fiction that Rommel had died of his wounds was carefully maintained. The integrity of Rommel's memory and legacy was preserved for the German people.[\[27\]](#)

Rommel was the one German field marshal whom all of the Western Allies respected, and whom many senior British and American officers openly admired. Hans Speidel successfully emphasized his role as Rommel's chief of staff to enhance his career in postwar Germany. Speidel was commissioned as *generalleutnant* in West Germany in 1955, and two years later he was appointed commander-in-chief of the NATO ground forces in Central Europe.[\[28\]](#) The possibility that Speidel had lied about Rommel's involvement in the conspiracy against Hitler, and that Speidel's testimony had contributed to Rommel's premature death, did not seem to bother the NATO military leaders.

Rommel was universally admired by his troops and always acted in what he thought was the best interest of Germany. David Irving writes: "We can remember Rommel's genius for the unexpected, his mechanical gifts, [and] his original tactic devices. Combat troops are not fools; they can sift the charlatans from the great commanders. Without exception, Rommel's troops—of whatever nationality—adored him."[\[29\]](#)

## Endnotes

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[\[1\]](#) Butler, Daniel Allen, *Field Marshal: The Life and Death of Erwin Rommel*, Philadelphia, Pa.: Casemate: 2015, p. 9.

[\[2\]](#) *Ibid.*, p. 133.

[\[3\]](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 150-151, 193.

[\[4\]](#) *Ibid.*, p. 337.

[\[5\]](#) Irving, David, *The Trail of the Fox*, New York: Thomas Congdon Books, 1997, p. 313.

[\[6\]](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 396-399.

[\[7\]](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 412-414.

[\[8\]](#) Marshall, Charles F., *Discovering the Rommel Murder: The Life and Death of the Desert Fox*, Mechanicsburg, Pa.: Stackpole Books, 1994, pp. 147-148.

[\[9\]](#) *Ibid.*, pp. 235-236.

[\[10\]](#) Tedor, Richard, *Hitler's Revolution*, Chicago: 2013, p. 257.

- [11] Hankey, Maurice Pascal Alers, *Politics, Trials and Errors*, Chicago: Regnery, 1950, pp. 125-126.
- [12] Lucas, James, *Last Days of the Reich—The Collapse of Nazi Germany, May 1945*, London: Arms and Armour Press, 1986, p. 196.
- [13] Butler, Daniel Allen, *Field Marshal: The Life and Death of Erwin Rommel*, Philadelphia, Pa.: 2015, pp. 518-519, 536; Irving, David, *The Trail of the Fox*, New York: Thomas Congdon Books, 1997, pp. 406, 426; Marshall, Charles F., *Discovering the Rommel Murder: The Life and Death of the Desert Fox*, Mechanicsburg, Pa.: Stackpole Books, 1994, p. 225.
- [14] Irving, David, *The Trail of the Fox*, New York: Thomas Congdon Books, 1997, pp. 428-429, 432.
- [15] *Ibid.*, pp. 429-432, 440, 442.
- [16] [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Georg\\_Hansen](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Georg_Hansen).
- [17] Irving, David, *The Trail of the Fox*, New York: Thomas Congdon Books, 1997, p. 437.
- [18] *Ibid.*, pp. 437-438.
- [19] Butler, Daniel Allen, *Field Marshal: The Life and Death of Erwin Rommel*, Philadelphia, Pa.: Casemate: 2015, pp. 536-537.
- [20] Irving, David, *The Trail of the Fox*, New York: Thomas Congdon Books, 1997, pp. 430-431.
- [21] *Ibid.*, p. 431.
- [22] Butler, Daniel Allen, *Field Marshal: The Life and Death of Erwin Rommel*, Philadelphia, Pa.: 2015, p. 540.
- [23] *Ibid.*, pp. 539-540.
- [24] *Ibid.*, p. 541.
- [25] *Ibid.*
- [26] *Ibid.*, pp. 541-543.
- [27] *Ibid.*, pp. 545-546.
- [28] *Ibid.*, pp. 509-510.
- [29] Irving, David, *The Trail of the Fox*, New York: Thomas Congdon Books, 1997, p. 454.

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